

Canada's ebullient over new bullion coins

By Roger Boye

Canadian officials are cheering the successful debut last month of Maple Leaf bullion coins made of platinum and silver.

"Judging from the reaction of our [coin] distributors, we're off to an excellent start," said Michael Francis, a spokesman for the Royal Canadian Mint. "We'll likely exceed our original sales goals."

When the programs began on Nov. 17, the mint projected first-year sales of 100,000 troy ounces of platinum and 800,000 troy ounces of silver. The newcomers join Canada's gold Maple Leaf, which ranked as the world's most widely traded gold coin in 1987 and probably will do so again this year.

As with other types of bullion coins, the platinum Maple Leaf is produced in four sizes—one ounce to one-tenth ounce—and is sold by selected coin shops and brokerage houses for the value of the metal plus a small commission. (On Dec. 1, one ounce of



A rare 1861 "double Eagle" \$20 gold piece sold for \$600,000 plus a \$60,000 buyer's fee at an auction in New York recently.

platinum cost about \$600.) The silver Maple Leaf weighs one troy ounce.

Last September, Australia became the first large country to market an investment-grade platinum coin, the "Koala." Worldwide sales surpassed the first-year target of 100,000 troy ounces within two months, due in part to a gyrating platinum market and the coin's distinctive design.

Meanwhile, the U.S. American Eagle remains the most popular silver bullion coin, with sales of about 20 million troy ounces since its debut in late 1986. However, demand for gold Eagles has waned during the past 18 months. During October, for example, Uncle Sam distributed just 61,000 troy ounces of gold Eagles, far below the monthly average of more than 300,000 ounces between October 1986 and June 1987.

• • •

A U.S. gold piece dated 1861 has sold for \$600,000 plus a \$60,000 "buyer's fee"—the fourth

highest coin-auction price on record.

Hobbyists attending the mid-November auction in New York used words such as "cosmic" and "electrifying" to describe the sale of the gold coin and hundreds of other rarities once owned by U.S. Ambassador R. Henry Norweb and his wife, Emery May.

The \$20 "double Eagle"—which Mrs. Norweb bought about 30 years ago for \$5,000—is one of two known coins with a special tails-side design engraved by Anthony C. Paquet, who worked for the U.S. Mint. Paquet's engraving was supposed to go on all \$20 gold pieces produced in 1861, but technical problems early that year forced officials to discontinue its use.

The Norweb coin hoard grossed about \$20 million in three sales during the past several months. The coin-auction price record of \$725,000 for a single item—paid for a 1787 Brasher doubloon—was set in November, 1979, near the peak of the coin-market boom.